

THE EMPEROR OF ELAM¹

By H. G. DWIGHT

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I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

Ecclesiastes, ix, 11.

I

THE first of the two boats to arrive at this unappointed rendezvous was one to catch the eye even in that river of strange craft. She had neither the raking bow nor the rising poop of the local *mehala*, but a tall in-curving beak, not unlike those of certain Mesopotamian sculptures, with a windowed and curtained deck-house at the stern. Forward she carried a short mast. The lateen sail was furled, however, and the galley was propelled at a fairly good gait by seven pairs of long sweeps. They flashed none too rhythmically, it must be added, at the sun which had just risen above the Persian mountains. And although the slit sleeves of the fourteen oarsmen, all of them young and none of them ill to look upon, flapped decoratively enough about the handles of the sweeps, they could not be said to present a shipshape appearance. Neither did the black felt caps the boatmen wore, fantastically tall and knotted about their heads with gay fringed scarves.

This barge had passed out of the Ab-i-Diz and was making its stately enough way across the basin of divided waters below Bund-i-Kir, when from the mouth of the Ab-i-Gerger—the easterly of two turbid threads into

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which the Karun above this point is split by a long island — there shot a trim white motor-boat. The noise she made in the breathless summer sunrise, intensified and reechoed by the high clay banks which here rise thirty feet or more above the water, caused the rowers of the galley to look around. Then they dropped their sweeps in astonishment at the spectacle of the small boat advancing so rapidly toward them without any effort on the part of the four men it contained, as if blown by the breath of jinn. The word *Firengi*, however, passed around the deck — that word so flattering to a great race, which once meant Frank but which now, in one form or another, describes for the people of western Asia the people of Europe and their cousins beyond the seas. Among the friends of the jinn, of whom as it happened only two were Europeans, there also passed an explanatory word. But although they pronounced the strange oarsmen to be Lurs, they caused their jinni to cease his panting, so struck were they by the appearance of the high-beaked barge.

The two craft drifted abreast of each other about midway of the sunken basin. As they did so, one of the Europeans in the motor-boat, a stocky black-moustached fellow in blue overalls, wearing in place of the regulation helmet of that climate a greasy black *béret* over one ear, lifted his hand from the wheel and called out the Arabic salutation of the country:

“Peace be unto you!”

“And to you, peace!” responded a deep voice from the doorway of the deck-house. It was evident that the utterer of this friendly antiphon was not a Lur. Fairer, taller, stouter, and older than his wild-looking crew, he was also better dressed — in a girdled robe of gray silk, with a striped silk scarf covering his hair and the back of his neck in the manner of the Arabs. A thick brown beard made his appearance more imposing, while two scars across his left cheek, emerging from the beard, suggested or added to something in him which might on occasion become formidable. As it was he stepped for-

ward with a bow and addressed a slim young man who sat in the stern of the motor-boat. "Shall we pass as Kinglake and the Englishman of *Eothen* did in the desert," asked the stranger, smiling, in a very good English, "because they had not been introduced? Or will you do me the honor to come on board my—ark?"

The slim young man, whose fair hair, smooth face, and white clothes made him the most boyish looking of that curious company, lifted his white helmet and smiled in return.

"Why not?" he assented. And, becoming conscious that his examination of this surprising stranger, who looked down at him with odd light eyes, was too near a stare, he added: "What on earth is your ark made of, Mr. Noah?"

What she was made of, as a matter of fact, was what heightened the effect of remoteness she produced—a hard dark wood unknown to the lower Karun, cut in lengths of not more than two or three feet and caulked with reeds and mud.

"'Make thee an ark of gopher wood,'" quoted the stranger. "'Rooms shalt thou make in the ark, and thou shalt pitch it within and without with pitch.'"

"Bitumen, eh?" exclaimed the slim young man. "Where did you get it?"

"Do you ask, you who drill oil at Meidan-i-Naft?"

"As it happens, I don't!" smiled the slim young man.

"At any rate," continued the stranger, after a scarcely perceptible pause, "let me welcome you on board the Ark." And when the unseen jinni had made it possible for the slim young man to set foot on the deck of the barge, the stranger added, with a bow: "Magin is my name—from Brazil."

If the slim young man did not stare again, he at least had time to make out that the oddity of his host's light eyes lay not so much in the fact of their failing to be distinctly brown, gray, or green, as that they had a translucent look. Then he responded briefly, holding out his hand:

"Matthews. But isn't this a long way from Rio de Janeiro?"

"Well," returned the other, "it's not so near London! But come in and have something, won't you?" And he held aside the reed portière that screened the door of the deck-house.

"My word! You do know how to do yourself!" exclaimed Matthews. His eye took in the Kerman embroidery on the table in the centre of the small saloon, the gazelle skins and silky Shiraz rugs covering the two divans at the sides, the fine Sumak carpet on the floor, and the lion pelt in front of an inner door. "By Jove!" he exclaimed again. "That's a beauty!"

"Ha!" laughed the Brazilian. "The Englishman spies his lion first!"

"Where did you find him?" asked Matthews, going behind the table for a better look. "They're getting few and far between around here, they say."

"Oh, they still turn up," answered the Brazilian, it seemed to Matthews not too definitely. Before he could pursue the question farther, Magin clapped his hands. Instantly there appeared at the outer door a barefooted Lur, whose extraordinary cap looked to Matthews even taller and more pontifical than those of his fellow-countrymen at the oars. The Lur, his hands crossed on his girdle, received a rapid order and vanished as silently as he came.

"I wish I knew the lingo like that!" commented Matthews.

Magin waved a deprecatory hand.

"One picks it up soon enough. Besides, what's the use — with a man like yours? Who is he, by the way? He doesn't look English."

"Who? Gaston? He isn't. He's French. And he doesn't know too much of the lingo. But the blighter could get on anywhere. He's been all over the place — Algiers, Egypt, Baghdad. He's been chauffeur to more nabobs in turbans than you can count. He's a topping mechanic, too. The wheel hasn't been invented that beg-

gar can't make go 'round. The only trouble he has is with his own. He keeps time for a year or two, and then something happens to his mainspring and he gets the sack. But he never seems to go home. He always moves on to some place where it's hotter and dirtier. You should hear his stories! He's an amusing devil."

"And perhaps not so different from the rest of us!" threw out Magin. "What flea bites us? Why do you come here, courting destruction in a cockleshell that may any minute split on a rock and spill you to the sharks, when you might be punting some pretty girl up the backwaters of the Thames? Why do I float around in this old ark of reeds and bulrushes, like an elderly Moses in search of a promised land, who should be at home wearing the slippers of middle age? What is it? A sunstroke? This is hardly the country where Goethe's citrons bloom!"

"Damned if I know!" laughed Matthews. "I fancy we like a bit of a lark!"

The Brazilian laughed too.

"A bit of a lark!" he echoed.

Just then the silent Lur reappeared with a tray.

"I say!" protested Matthews. "Whiskey and soda at five o'clock in the morning, in the middle of July—"

"1914, if you must be so precise!" added Magin jovially. "But why not?" he demanded. "Aren't you an Englishman? You mustn't shake the pious belief in which I was brought up, that you are all weaned with Scotch! Say when. It isn't every day that I have the pleasure of so fortunate an encounter." And, rising, he lifted his glass, bowed, and said: "Here's to a bit of a lark, Mr. Matthews!"

The younger man rose to it. But inwardly he began to feel a little irked.

"By the way," he asked, nibbling at a biscuit, "can you tell me anything about the Ab-i-Diz? I dare say you must know something about it — since your men look as if they came from up that way. Is there a decent channel as far as Dizful?"

"Ah!" uttered Magin slowly. "Are you thinking of going up there?" He considered the question, and his guest, with a flicker in his lighted eyes. "Well, decent is a relative word, you know. However, wonders can be accomplished with a stout rope and a gang of natives, even beyond Dizful. But here you see me and my ark still whole — after a night journey, too. The worst thing is the sun. You see I am more careful of my skin than you. As for the shoals, the rapids, the sharks, the lions, the nomads who pop at you from the bank, *et cetera* — you are an Englishman! Do you take an interest in antiques?" he broke off abruptly.

"Yes — though interest is a relative word too, I expect."

"Quite so!" agreed the Brazilian. "I have rather a mania for that sort of thing, myself. Wait. Let me show you." And he went into the inner cabin. When he came back he held up an alabaster cup. "A Greek kylix!" he cried. "Pure Greek! What an outline, eh? This is what keeps me from putting on my slippers! I have no doubt Alexander left it behind him. Perhaps Hephaestion drank out of it, or Nearchus, to celebrate his return from India. And some rascally Persian stole it out of a tent!"

Matthews, taking the cup, saw the flicker brighten in the Brazilian's eyes.

"Nice little pattern of grape leaves, that," he said. "And think of picking it up out here!"

"Oh you can always pick things up, if you know where to look," said Magin. "Dieulafoy and the rest of them didn't take everything. How could they? The people who have come and gone through this country of Elam! Why just over there, at Bund-i-Kir, Antigonus fought Eumenes and the Silver Shields for the spoils of Susa — and won them! I have discovered — But come in here." And he pushed wider open the door of the inner cabin.

Matthews stepped into what was evidently a stateroom.

A broad bunk filled one side of it, and the visitor could not help remarking a second interior door. But his eye was chiefly struck by two, three, no four, chests, which took up more space in the narrow cabin than could be convenient for its occupant. They seemed to be made of the same mysterious dark wood as the "ark," clamped with copper.

"I say! Those aren't bad!" he exclaimed. "More of the spoils of Susa?"

"Ho! My trunks? I had them made up the river, like the rest. But I wonder what would interest you in my museum. Let's see." He bent over one of the chests, unlocked it, rummaged under the cover, and brought out a broad metal circlet which he handed to Matthews. "How would that do for a crown, eh?"

The young man took it over to the porthole. The metal, he then saw, was a soft antique gold, wrought into a decoration of delicate spindles, with a border of filigree. The circlet was beautiful in itself, and astonishingly heavy. But what it chiefly did for Matthews was to sharpen the sense of strangeness, of remoteness, which this bizarre galley, come from unknown waters, had brought into the familiar muddy Karun.

"As a matter of fact," went on the Brazilian, "it's an anklet. But can you make it out? Those spindles are Persian, while the filigree is more Byzantine than anything else. You find funny things up there, in caves—"

He tossed a vague hand, into which Matthews put the anklet, saying:

"Take it before I steal it!"

"Keep it, won't you?" proposed the astonishing Brazilian.

"Oh, thanks. But I could hardly do that," Matthews replied.

"Why not?" protested Magin. "As a souvenir of a pleasant meeting! I have a ton of them." He waved his hand at the chests.

"No, really, thanks," persisted the young man. "And

I'm afraid we must be getting on. I don't know the river, you see, and I'd like to reach Dizful before dark."

The Brazilian studied him a moment.

"As you say," he finally conceded. "But you will at least have another drink before you go?"

"No, not even that, thanks," said Matthews. "We really must be off. But it's been very decent of you."

He felt both awkward and amused as he backed out to the deck, followed by his imposing host. At sight of the two the crew scattered to their oars. They had been leaning over the side, absorbed in admiration of the white jinn-boat. Matthews' Persian servant handed up to Magin's butler a tray of tea glasses — on which Matthews also noted a bottle. In honor of that bottle Gaston himself stood up and took off his greasy cap.

"A thousand thanks, Monsieur," he said. "I have tasted nothing so good since I left France."

"In that case, my friend," rejoined Magin in French as good as his English, "it is time you returned!" And he abounded in amiable speeches and ceremonious bows until the last *au revoir*.

"*Au plaisir!*" called back Gaston, having invoked his jinni. Then, after a last look at the barge, he asked over his shoulder in a low voice: "Who is this extraordinary type, M'sieu Guy? A species of an Arab, who speaks French and English and who voyages in a galley from a museum!"

"A Brazilian, he says," imparted M'sieu Guy — whose surname was beyond Gaston's gallic tongue.

"Ah! The uncle of America! That understands itself! He sent me out a cognac, too! And did he present you to his *dame de compagnie*? She put her head out of a porthole to look at our boat. A Lur, like the others, but with a pair of blistering black eyes! And a jewel in her nose!"

"It takes you, Gaston," said Guy Matthews, "to discover a dame of company!"

II

When the white motor-boat had disappeared in the glitter of the Ab-i-Diz, Senhor Magin, not unlike other fallible human beings when released from the necessity of keeping up a pitch, appeared to lose something of his gracious humor. So, it transpired, did his decorative boatmen, who had not expected to row twenty-five miles upstream at a time when most people in that climate seek the relief of their *serdabs* — which are underground chambers cooled by running water, it may be, and by a tall *badgir*, or air chimney. The running water, to be sure, was here, and had already begun to carry the barge down the Karun. If the high banks of that tawny stream constituted a species of air chimney, however, such air as moved therein was not calculated for relief. But when Brazilians command, even a Lur may obey. These Lurs, at all events, propelled their galley back to the basin of Bund-i-Kir, and on into the Ab-i-Shuteit — which is the westerly of those two halves of the Karun. Before night-fall the barge had reached the point where navigation ends. There Magin sent his majordomo ashore to procure mounts. And at sunset the two of them, followed by a horse boy, rode northward six or seven miles, till the city of Shuster rose dark above them in the summer evening, on its rock that cleaves the Karun in two.

The Bazaar by which they entered the town was deserted at that hour, save by dogs that set up a terrific barking at the sight of strangers. Here the *charvadar* lighted a vast white linen lantern, which he proceeded to carry in front of the two riders. He seemed to know where he was going, for he led the way without a pause through long blank silent streets of indescribable filth and smells. The gloom of them was deepened by jutting balconies, and by innumerable *badgirs* that cut out a strange black fretwork against amazing stars. At last the three stopped in front of a gate in the vicinity of the citadel. This was not one of the gateways that separate the differ-

ent quarters of Shuster, but a door in a wall, recessed in a tall arch and ornamented with an extraordinary variety of iron clamps, knobs, locks, and knockers.

Of one of the latter the *charvadar* made repeated use, until someone shouted from inside. The horse-boy shouted back, and presently his lantern caught a glitter of two eyes in a slit. The eyes belonged to a cautious doorkeeper, who after satisfying himself that the visitors were not enemies admitted the Brazilian and the Lur into a vaulted brick vestibule. Then, having looked to his wards and bolts, he lighted Magin through a corridor which turned into a low tunnel-like passage. This led into a sort of cloister, where a covered ambulatory surrounded a dark pool of stars. Thence another passage brought them out into a great open court. Here an invisible jet of water made an illusion of coolness in another, larger, pool, overlooked by a portico of tall slim pillars. Between them Magin caught the glow of a cigar.

"Good evening, Ganz," his bass voice called from the court.

"Heaven! Is that you?" replied the smoker of the cigar. "What are you doing here, in God's name? I imagined you at Mohamera, by this time, or even in the Gulf." This remark, it may not be irrelevant to say, was in German — as spoken in the trim town of Zurich.

"And so I should have been," replied the polyglot Magin in the same language, mounting the steps of the portico and shaking his friend's hand, "but for — all sorts of things. If we ran aground once, we ran aground three thousand times. I begin to wonder if we shall get through the reefs at Ahwaz — with all the rubbish I have on board."

"Ah, bah! You can manage, going down. But why do you waste your time in Shuster, with all that is going on in Europe?"

"H'm!" grunted Magin. "What is going on in Europe? A great family is wearing well cut mourning, and a small family is beginning to turn green! How does

that affect two quiet nomads in Elam — especially when one of them is a Swiss and one a Brazilian?" He laughed, and lighted a cigar the other offered him. "My dear Ganz, it is an enigma to me how a man who can listen to such a fountain, and admire such stars, can perpetually sigh after the absurdities of Europe! Which reminds me that I met an Englishman this morning."

"Well, what of that? Are Englishmen so rare?"

"Alas, no — though I notice, my good Ganz, that you do your best to thin them out! This specimen was too typical for me to be able to describe him. Younger than usual, possibly; yellow hair, blue eyes, constrained manner, everything to sample. He called himself Mark, or Matthew. Rather their apostolic air, too — except that he was in the Oil Company's motor-boat. But he gave me to understand that he was not in the Oil Company."

"Quite so."

"I saw for myself that he knows nothing about archæology. Who is he? Lynch? Bank? Telegraph?"

"He's not Lynch, and he's not Bank, and he's not Telegraph. Neither is he consul, or even that famous railroad. He's — English!" And Ganz let out a chuckle at the success of his own characterization.

"Ah! So?" exclaimed Magin elaborately. "I hear, by the way, that that famous railroad is not marching so fast. The Lurs don't like it. But sometimes even Englishmen," he added, "have reasons for doing what they do. This one, at any rate, seemed more inclined to ask questions than to answer them. I confess I don't know whether it was because he had nothing to say or whether he preferred not to say it. Is he perhaps a son of Papa, making the grand tour?"

"More or less. Papa gave him no great letter of credit, though. He came out to visit some of the Oil people. And he's been here long enough to learn quite a lot of Persian."

"So he starts this morning, I take it, from Sheleilieh. But why the devil does he go to Dizful, by himself?"

"And why the devil shouldn't he? He's out here, and he wants to see the sights — such as they are. So he's going to take a look at the ruins of Susa, and at your wonderful unspoiled Dizful. Shir Ali Khan will be delighted to get a few *tomans* for his empty house by the river. Then the 21st, you know, is the coronation. So I gave him a letter to the Father of Swords, who —"

"Thunder and lightning!" Magin's heavy voice resounded in the portico very like a bellow. "You, Ganz, sent this man to the Father of Swords? He might be one of those lieutenants from India who go smelling around in their holidays, so pink and innocent!"

"What is that to me?" demanded the Swiss, raising his own voice. "Or to you either? After all, Senhor Magin, are you the Emperor of Elam?"

The Brazilian laughed.

"Not yet! And naturally it's nothing to you, when you cash him checks and sell him tinned cows and quinine. But for a man who perpetually sighs after Europe, Herr Ganz, and for a Swiss of the north, you strike me as betraying a singular lack of sensibility to certain larger interests of your race. However — What concerns me is that you should have confided to this young man, with such a roll of sentimental eyes as I can imagine, that Dizful is still 'unspoiled'! If Dizful is unspoiled, he might spoil it. I've found some very nice things up there, you know. I was even fool enough to show him one or two."

"Bah! He likes to play tennis and shoot! You know these English boys."

Magin considered those English boys in silence for a moment.

"Yes, I know them. This one told me he liked a bit of a lark! I know myself what a lark it is to navigate the Ab-i-Diz, at the end of July! But what is most curious about these English boys is that when they go out for a bit of a lark they come home with Egypt or India in their pocket. Have you noticed that, Ganz? That's their idea of a bit of a lark. And with it all they are still chil-

dren. What can one do with such people? A bit of a lark! Well, you will perhaps make me a little annoyance, Mr. Adolf Ganz, by sending your English boy up to Dizful to have a bit of a lark. However, he'll either give himself a sunstroke or get himself bitten in two by a shark. He asked me about the channel, and I had an inspiration. I told him he would have no trouble. So he'll go full speed and we shall see what we shall see. Do you sell coffins, Mr. Ganz, in addition to all your other valuable merchandise?"

"Naturally, Mr. Magin," replied the Swiss. "Do you need one? But you haven't explained to me yet why you give me the pain of saying good-bye to you a second time."

"Partly, Mr. Ganz, because I am tired of sleeping in an oven, and partly because I — the Father of Swords has asked me to run up to Bala Bala before I leave. But principally because I need a case or two more of your excellent *vin de champagne* — manufactured out of Persian petroleum, the water of the Karun, the nameless abominations of Shuster, and the ever effervescing impudence of the Swiss Republic!"

"What can I do?" smiled the flattered author of this concoction. "I have to use what I can get, in this God-forsaken place."

"And I suppose you will end by getting a million, eh?"

"No such luck! But I'm getting a piano. Did I tell you? A Blüthner. It's already on the way up from Mohamera."

"A Blüthner! In Shuster! God in heaven! Why did you wait until I had gone?"

"Well, aren't you still here?" The fact of Magin's being still there, so unexpectedly, hung in his mind. "By the way, speaking of the Father of Swords, did you give him an order?"

"I gave him an order. Didn't you pay it?"

"I thought twice about it. For unless you have struck oil, up in that country of yours where nobody goes, or gold —"

"Mr. Adolf Ganz," remarked the Brazilian with some pointedness, "all I ask of you is to respect my signature and to keep closed that many-tongued mouth of yours. I sometimes fear that in you the banker is inclined to exchange confidences with the chemist — or even with the son of Papa who cashes a check. Eh?"

Ganz cleared his throat.

"In that case," he rejoined, "all you have to do is to ask him, when you meet him again at Bala Bala. And the English bank will no doubt be happy to accept the transfer of your account."

Magin began to chuckle.

"We assert our dignity? Never mind, Adolf. As a matter of fact I have a high opinion of your discretion — so high that when I found the Imperial Bank of Elam I shall put you in charge of it! And you did me a real service by sending that motor-boat across my bow this morning. For in it I discovered just the chauffeur I have been looking for. I am getting tired of my galley, you know. You will see something when I come back."

"But," Ganz asked after a moment, "do you really expect to come back?"

"But what else should I do? End my days sneezing and sniffing by some polite lake of Zurich like you, my poor Ganz, when you find in your hand the magic key that might unlock for you any door in the world? That, for example, is not my idea of a lark, as your son of Papa would say! Men are astounding animals, I admit. But I never could live in Europe, where you can't turn around without stepping on some one else's toes. I want room! I want air! I want light! And for a collector, you know, America is after all a little bare. While here —!"

"O God!" cried Adolf Ganz out of his dark Persian portico.

III

As Gaston very truly observed, there are moments in Persia when even the most experienced chauffeur is capa-

ble of an emotion. And an unusual number of such moments enlivened for Gaston and his companions their journey up the Ab-i-Diz. Indeed Matthews asked himself more than once why he had chosen so doubtful a road to Dizful, when he might so much more easily have ridden there, and at night. It certainly was not beautiful, that river of brass zigzagging out of sight of its empty hinterland. Very seldom did anything so visible as a palm lift itself against the blinding Persian blue. Konar trees were commoner, their dense round masses sometimes shading a white-washed tomb or a black tent. Once or twice at sight of the motor-boat a *bellam*, a native canoe, took refuge at the mouth of one of the gullies that scarred the bank like sun-cracks. Generally, however, there was nothing to be seen between the water and the sky but two yellow walls of clay, topped by endless thickets of tamarisk and nameless scrub. Matthews wondered, disappointed, whether a jungle looked like that, and if some black-maned lion walked more softly in it, or slept less soundly, hearing the pant of the unknown creature in the river. But there was no lack of more immediate lions in the path. The sun, for one thing, as the Brazilian had predicted, proved a torment against which double awnings faced with green were of small avail. Then the treacheries of a crooked and constantly shallowing channel needed all the attention the travelers could spare. And the rapids of Kaleh Bunder, where a rocky island flanked by two reefs threatened to bar any further progress, afforded the liveliest moments of their day.

The end of that day, nevertheless, found our sight-seer smoking cigarettes in Shir Ali Khan's garden at Dizful and listening to the camel bells that jingled from the direction of certain tall black pointed arches straddling the dark river. When Matthews looked at those arches by sunlight, and at the queer old flat-topped yellow town visible through them, he regretted that he had made up his mind to continue his journey so soon. However, he was coming back. So he packed off Gaston and the

Bakhtiari to Sheleilieh, where they and their motor-boat belonged. And he himself, with his servant Abbas and the *charvadar* of whom they hired horses, set out at nightfall for the mountain citadel of Bala Bala. For there the great Salman Taki Khan, chieftain of the lower Lurs, otherwise known as the Father of Swords, was to celebrate as became a redoubtable vassal of a remote and youthful suzerain the coronation of Ahmed Shah Kajar.

It was nearly morning again when, after a last scramble up a trough of rocks and gravel too steep for riding, the small cavalcade reached a plateau in the shadow of still loftier elevations. Here they were greeted by a furious barking of dogs. Indeed it quickly became necessary to organize a defence of whips and stones against the guardians of that high plateau. The uproar soon brought a shout out of the darkness. The *charvadar* shouted back, and after a long-distance colloquy there appeared a figure crowned by the tall *kola* of the Brazilian's boatmen, who drove the dogs away. The dialect in which he spoke proved incomprehensible to Matthews. Luckily it was not altogether so to Abbas, that underling long resigned to the eccentricities of the *Firengi*, whose accomplishments included even a sketchy knowledge of his master's tongue. It appeared that the law of Bala Bala forbade the door of the Father of Swords to open before sunrise. But the tall-hatted one offered the visitor the provisional hospitality of a black tent, of a refreshing drink of goats' buttermilk, and of a comfortable felt whereon to stretch cramped legs.

When Matthews returned to consciousness he first became aware of a blinding oblong of light in the dark wall of the tent. He then made out a circle of pontifical black hats, staring at him, his fair hair, and his indecently close-fitting clothes, in the silence of unutterable curiosity. It made him think, for a bewildered instant, that he was back on the barge he had met in the river. As for the black hats, what astonished them not least was the stranger's immediate demand for water, and his evident

dissatisfaction with the quantity of it they brought him. There happily proved to be no lack of this commodity, as Matthews' ears had told him. He was not long in pursuing the sound into the open, where he found himself at the edge of a village of black tents, pitched in a grassy hollow between two heights. The nearer and lower was a detached cone of rock, crowned by a rude castle. The other peak, not quite so precipitous, afforded foothold for scattered scrub oaks and for a host of slowly moving sheep and goats. Between them the plateau looked down on two sides into two converging valleys. And the clear air was full of the noise of a brook that cascaded between the scrub oaks of the higher mountain, raced past the tents, and plunged out of sight in the narrower gorge.

"Ripping!" pronounced Matthews genially to his black-hatted gallery.

He was less genial about the persistence of the gallery, rapidly increased by recruits from the black tents, in dogging him through every detail of his toilet. But he was rescued at last by Abbas and an old Lur who, putting his two hands to the edge of his black cap, saluted him in the name of the Father of Swords. The Lur then led the way to a trail that zigzagged up the lower part of the rocky cone. He explained the quantity of loose boulders obstructing the path by saying that they had been left there to roll down on whomever should visit the Father of Swords without an invitation. That such an enterprise would not be too simple became more evident when the path turned into a cave. Here another Lur was waiting with candles. He gave one each to the newcomers, leading the way to a low door in the rock. This was opened by an individual in a long red coat of ceremony, carrying a heavy silver mace, who gave Matthews the customary salutation of peace and bowed him into an irregular court. An infinity of doors opened out of it — chiefly of the stables, the old man said, pointing out a big white mule or two of the famous breed of Bala Bala. Thence the

visitor was led up a steep stone stair to a terrace giving entrance upon a corridor and another, narrower stone stair. From its prodigiously high steps he emerged into a hall, carpeted with felt. At this point, the Lurs took off their shoes. Matthews followed suit, being then ushered into what was evidently a room of state. It contained no furniture, to be sure, save for the handsome rugs on the floor. The room did not look bare, however, for its lines were broken by a deep alcove, and by a continuous succession of niches. Between and about the niches the walls were decorated with plaster reliefs of flowers and arabesques. Matthews wondered if the black hats were capable of that! But what chiefly caught his eye was the terrace opening out of the room, and the stupendous view.

The terrace hung over a green chasm where the two converging gorges met at the foot of the crag of Bala Bala. Matthews looked down as from the prow of a ship into the tumbled country below him, through which a river flashed sinuously toward the faraway haze of the plains. The sound of water filling the still clear air, the brilliance of the morning light, the wildness and remoteness of that mountain eyrie, so different from anything he had yet seen, added a last strangeness to the impressions of which the young man had been having so many.

"What a pity to spoil it with a railroad!" he could not help thinking, as he leaned over the parapet of the terrace.

"Sahib!" suddenly whispered Abbas behind him.

Matthews turned, and saw in the doorway of the terrace a personage who could be none other than his host. In place of the *kola* of his people this personage wore a great white turban, touched with gold. The loose blue *aba* enveloping his ample figure was also embroidered with gold. Not the least striking detail of his appearance however, was his beard, which had a pronounced tendency toward scarlet. His nails were likewise reddened with henna, reminding Matthews that the hands belonging to the nails were rumored to bear even more sinis-

ter stains. And the bottomless black eyes peering out from under the white turban lent surprising credibility to such rumors. But there was no lack of graciousness in the gestures with which those famous hands saluted the visitor and pointed him to a seat of honor on the rug beside the Father of Swords. The Father of Swords furthermore pronounced his heart uplifted to receive a friend of Ganz Sahib, that prince among the merchants of Shuster. Yet he did not hesitate to express a certain surprise at discovering in the friend of the prince among the merchants of Shuster one still in the flower of youth, who at the same time exhibited the features of good fortune and the lineaments of prudence. And he inquired as to what sorrow had led one so young to fold the carpet of enjoyment and wander so far from his parents.

Matthews, disdaining the promptings of Abbas — who stood apart like a statue of obsequiousness, each hand stuck into the sleeve of the other — responded as best he might. In the meantime tea and candies were served by a black hat on bended knee, who also produced a pair of ornate pipes. The Father of Swords marvelled that Matthews should have abandoned the delights of Shuster in order to witness his poor celebrations of the morrow, in honor of the coronation. And had he felt no fear of robbers, during his long night ride from Dizful? But what robbers were there to fear, protested Matthews, in the very shadow of Bala Bala? At that the Father of Swords began to make bitter complaint of the afflictions Allah had laid upon him, taking his text from these lines of Sadi: “If thou tellest the sorrows of thy heart, let it be to him in whose countenance thou mayst be assured of prompt consolation.” The world, he declared, was fallen into disorder, like the hair of an Ethiopian. Within the city wall was a people well disposed as angels; without, a band of tigers. After which he asked if the young *Firengi* were of the company of those who dug for the poisoned water of Bakhtiari Land, or whether perchance he were of the Peop of the Chain.

These figures of speech would have been incomprehensible to Matthews, if Abbas had not hinted something about oil rigs. He accordingly confessed that he had nothing to do with either of the two enterprises. The Father of Swords then expatiated on those who caused the Lurs to seize the hand of amazement with the teeth of chagrin, by dragging through their valleys a long chain, as if they meant to take prisoners. These unwelcome *Firengis* were also to be known by certain strange inventions on three legs, into which they would gaze by the hour. Were they warriors, threatening devastation? Or were they magicians, spying into the future and laying a spell upon the people of Luristan? Their account of themselves the Father of Swords found far from satisfactory, claiming as they did that they proposed to build a road of iron, whereby it would be possible for a man to go from Dizful to Khorremabad in one day. For the rest, what business had the people of Dizful, too many of whom were Arabs, in Khorremabad, a city of Lurs? Let the men of Dizful remain in Dizful, and those of Khorremabad continue where they were born. As for him, his white mules needed no road of iron to carry him about his affairs.

Matthews, recalling his own thoughts as he leaned over the parapet of the terrace, spoke consolingly to the Father of Swords concerning the People of the Chain. The Father of Swords listened to him, drawing meditatively at his waterpipe. He thereupon inquired if Matthews were acquainted with another friend of the prince among the merchants of Shuster, himself a *Firengi* by birth, though recently persuaded of the truths of Islam; and not like this visitor of good omen, in the bloom of youth, but bearded and hardened in battles, bearing the scars of them on his face.

Matthews began to go over in his mind the short list of Europeans he had met on the Karun, till suddenly he bethought him of that extraordinary barge he had encountered — could it be only a couple of days ago?

"Magin Sahib?" he asked. "I know him — if he is the one who travels in the river in a *mehala* not like other *mehalas*, rowed by Lurs."

"That is a musk which discloses itself by its scent, and not what the perfumers impose upon us." quoted the Father of Swords. "This man," he continued, "our friend and the friend of our friend, warned me that they of the chain are sons of oppression, destined to bring misfortune to the Lurs. Surely my soul is tightened, not knowing whom I may believe."

"Rum bounder!" said Matthews to himself, as his mind went back to the already mythic barge, and its fantastic oarsmen from these very mountains, and its antique-hunting, history-citing master from oversea, who quoted the Book of Genesis and who carried mysterious passengers with nose-jewels. But our not too articulate young man was less prompt about what he should say aloud. He began to find more in this interview than he had expected. He was tickled at his host's flowery forms of speech, and after all rather sympathized with the suspicious old ruffian, yet it was not for him to fail in loyalty toward the "People of the Chain." Several of them he knew, as it happened, and they had delighted him with their wild yarns of surveying in Luristan. So he managed no more than to achieve an appearance of slightly offended dignity.

Considering which, out of those opaque eyes, the Father of Swords clapped those famous hands and commanded a responsive black hat to bring him his green chest. At that Matthews pricked up interested ears indeed. The chest, however, when set down in front of the Father of Swords, proved to be nothing at all like the one out of which the Brazilian had taken his gold anklet. It was quite small and painted green, though quaintly enough provided with triple locks of beaten iron. The Father of Swords unlocked them deliberately, withdrew from an inner compartment a round tin case, and from that a roll of parchment which he pressed to his lips with

infinite solemnity. He then handed it to Matthews.

He was one, our not too articulate young man, to take things as they came and not to require, even east of Suez, the spice of romance with his daily bread. His last days, moreover, had been too crowded for him to ruminate over their taste. But it was not every day that he squatted on the same rug with a scarlet-bearded old cut-throat of a mountain chief. So it was that his more or less casual lark visibly took on, from the perspective of this castle in Luristan, as he unrolled a gaudy emblazonment of eagles at the top of the parchment, a new and curious color. For below the eagle he came upon what he darkly made out to be a species of treaty, inscribed neither in the Arabic nor in the Roman but in the German character, between the Father of Swords and a more notorious War Lord. And below that was signed, sealed, and imposingly paraphed the signature of one Julius Margin. Which was indeed a novel aspect for a Brazilian, however versatile, to reveal.

He permitted himself, did Guy Matthews, a smile.

"You do not kiss it?" observed the Father of Swords.

"In my country," Matthews began —

"But it is, may I be your sacrifice," interrupted the Father of Swords, "a letter from the Shah of the Shahs of the *Firengis*." It was evident that he was both impressed and certain of impressing his hearer. "He has promised eternal peace to me and to my people."

The Englishman in Matthews permitted him a second smile.

"The Father of Swords," he said, "speaks a word which I do not understand. I am a *Firengi*, but I have never heard of a Shah of the Shahs of the *Firengis*. In the house of Islam are there not many who rule? In Tehran, for instance, there is the young Ahmed Shah. Then among the Bakhtiaris there is an Ilkhani, at Mohamera there is the Sheikh of the Cha'b, and in the valleys of Pusht-i-Kuh none is above the Father of Swords. I do not forget, either, the Emirs of Mecca and Afghanis-

tan, or the Sultan in Stambul. And among them what *Firengi* shall say who is the greatest? And so it is in *Firengistan*. Yet as for this paper, it is written in the tongue of a king smaller than the one whose subject I am, whose crown has been worn by few fathers. But the name at the bottom of the paper is not his. It is not even a name known to the *Firengis* when they speak among themselves of the great of their lands. Where did you see him?"

The Father of Swords stroked his scarlet beard, looking at his young visitor with more of a gleam in the dull black of his eyes than Matthews had yet noticed.

"Truly is it said: 'Fix not thy heart on what is transitory, for the Tigris will continue to flow through Baghdad after the race of Caliphs is extinct!' You make it clear to me that you are of the People of the Chain."

"If I were of the People of the Chain," protested Matthews, "there is no reason why I should hide it. The People of the Chain do not steal secretly through the valleys of Pusht-i-Kuh, telling the Lurs lies and giving them papers in the night. I am not one of the People of the Chain. But the king of the People of the Chain is also my king. And he is a great king, lord of many lands and many seas, who has no need of secret messengers, hostlers and scullions of whom no one has heard, to persuade strangers of his greatness."

"Your words do not persuade me!" cried the Father of Swords. "A wise man is like a jar in the house of the apothecary, silent but full of virtues. If the king who sent me this letter has such hostlers and such scullions, how great must be his khans and viziers! And why do the Turks trust him? Why do the other *Firengis* allow his ships in Bushir and Basra? Or why do not the People of the Chain better prove the character of their lord? But the hand of liberality is stronger than the arm of power. This king, against whom you speak, heard me draw the sigh of affliction from the bosom of uncertainty.

He deigned to regard me with the eye of patronage, sending me good words and promises of peace and friendship. He will not permit the house of Islam to be troubled. From many we have heard it."

"Ah!" exclaimed Matthews. "Now I understand why you have not kept your promises to the People of the Chain!" And he rubbed his thumb against his forefinger, in the gesture of the East that signifies the payment of money.

"Why not?" demanded the Father of Swords, angrily. "The duty of a king is munificence. Or why should there be a way to pass through my mountains? Has it ever been said of the Lur that he stepped back before a stranger? That is for the Shah in Tehran, who has become the servant of the Russian! Let the People of the Chain learn that my neck does not know how to bow! And what guest are you to sprinkle my sore with the salt of harsh words? A boy, who comes here no one knows why, on hired horses, with only one follower to attend him!"

Matthews flushed.

"Salman Taki Khan," he retorted, "it is true that I come to you humbly, and without a beard. And your beard is already white, and you can call out thirty thousand men to follow you. Yet a piece of gold will make you believe a lie. And I swear to you that whether I give you back this paper to put in your chest, or whether I spit on it and tear it in pieces and throw it to the wind of that valley, it is one."

To which the Father of Swords made emphatic enough rejoinder by snatching the parchment away, rising to his feet, and striding out of the room without a word.

IV

The festivities in honor of the Shah's coronation took place at Bala Bala with due solemnity. Among the black tents there was much plucking of plaintive strings, there

was more stuffing of mutton and *pilau*, and after dark many little rockets, improvized out of gunpowder and baked clay, traced brief arabesques of gold against the black of the underlying gorges. The castle celebrated in the same simple way. The stuffing, to be sure, was more prolonged and recondite, while dancers imported from Dizful swayed and snapped their fingers, singing for the pleasure of the Father of Swords. The eyes of that old man of the mountain remained opaque as ever, save when he rebuked the almoner who sat at meat with him for indecorously quoting the lines of Sadi, when he says: "Such was this delicate crescent of the moon, and fascination of the holy, this form of an angel, and decoration of a peacock; that let them once behold her, and continence must cease to exist in the constitutions of the chaste."

This rebuke might have been called forth by the presence of another guest at the board. Be that as it may, the eyes of the Father of Swords glimmered perceptibly when they rested on the unannounced visitor for whom he fished out, with his own henna'ed fingers, the fattest morsels of mutton and the juiciest sweets. I hasten to add that the newcomer was not the one whose earlier arrival and interview with the Father of Swords has already been recorded. He was, nevertheless, a personage not unknown to this record, whether as *Senhor Magin* of Brazil or as the emissary of the Shah of the Shahs of *Firengistan*. For not only had he felt impelled to bid good-by a second time to his friend Adolf Ganz, prince among the merchants of Shustar. He had even postponed his voyage down the Karun long enough to make one more journey overland to Bala Bala. And he heard there, not without interest, the story of the short visit and the sudden flight of the young Englishman he had accidentally met on the river.

As for Matthews, he celebrated the coronation at Dizful, in bed. And by the time he had slept off his fag, Bala Bala and the Father of Swords and the green chest

and the ingenious Magin looked to him more than ever like figures of myth. He was too little of the timber out of which journalists, romancers, or diplomats are made to take them very seriously. The world he lived in, moreover, was too solid to be shaken by any such flimsy device as the one of which he had happened to catch a glimpse. What had been real to him was that he, Guy Matthews, had been suspected of playing a part in story-book intrigues, and had been treated rudely by an old barbarian of whom he expected the proverbial hospitality of the East. His affair had therefore been to show Mr. Scarlet Beard that if a Lur could turn his back, an Englishman could do likewise. He now saw, to be sure, that he himself had not been altogether the pattern of courtesy. But the old man of the mountain had got what was coming to him. And Matthews regretted very little, after all, missing what he had gone to see. For Dizful, peering at him through the arches of the bridge, reminded that there was still something to see.

It must be said of him, however, that he showed no impatience to see the neighboring ruins of Susa. He was not one, this young man who was out for a bit of a lark, to sentimentalize about antiquity or the charm of the unspoiled. Yet even such young men are capable of finding the rumness of strange towns a passable enough lark, to say nothing of the general unexpectedness of life. And Dizful turned out to be quite as unexpected, in its way, as Bala Bala. Matthews found that out before he had been three days in the place, when a sudden roar set all the loose little panes tinkling in Shir Ali Khan's garden windows.

Abbas explained that this was merely a cannon shot, announcing the new moon of Ramazan. That loud call of the faith evidently made Dizful a rummer place than it normally was. Matthews soon got used to the daily repetitions of the sound, rumbling off at sunset and before dawn into the silence of the plains. But the recurring explosion became for him the voice of the particular

rumness of the fanatical old border town — of fierce suns, terrific smells, snapping dogs, and scowling people. When the stranger without the gate crossed his bridge of a morning for a stroll in the town, he felt like a discoverer of some lost desert city. He threaded alleys of blinding light, he explored dim thatched bazaars, he studied tiled doorways in blank mud walls, he investigated quaint water-mills by the river, and scarce a soul did he see, unless a stork in its nest on top of a tall badgir or a naked dervish lying in a scrap of shade asleep under a lion skin. It was as if Dizful drowsed sullenly in that July blaze brewing something, like a geyser, and burst out with it at the end of the unendurable day.

The brew of the night, however, was a different mixture, quite the rummiest compound of its kind Matthews had ever tasted. The bang of the sunset gun instantly brought the deserted city back to life. Lights began to twinkle — in tea houses, along the river, among the indigo plantations — streets filled with ghostly costumes and jostling camels, and everywhere voices would celebrate the happy return of dusk so strangely and piercingly that they made Matthews think of “battles far away.” This was most so when he listened to them, out of sight of unfriendly eyes, from his own garden. Above the extraordinary rumor that drifted to him through the arches of the bridge he heard the wailing of pipes, raucous blasts of cow horns, the thumping of drums; while dogs barked incessantly, and all night long the caravans of Mesopotamia jingled to and fro. Then the cannon would thunder out its climax, and the city would fall anew under the spell of the sun.

The moon of those Arabian nights was nearing its first quarter and Matthews was waiting for it to become bright enough for him to fulfill his true duty as a sight-seer by riding to the mounds of Susa, when Dizful treated Matthews to fresh discoveries as to what an unspoiled town may contain. It contained, Abbas informed

him with some mystery after one of his prolonged visits to the bazaar, another *firengi*. This *firengi*'s servant, moreover, had given Abbas explicit directions as to the whereabouts of the *firengi*'s house, in order that Abbas might give due warning, as is the custom of the country, of a call from Matthews. Whereat Matthews made the surprising announcement that he had not come to Dizful to call on *firengis*. The chief charm of Dizful for him, as a matter of fact, was that there he felt himself free of the social obligations under which he had lain rather longer than he liked. But if Abbas was able to resign himself to this new proof of the eccentricity of his master, the unknown *firengi* apparently was not. At all events, Matthews soon made another discovery as to the possibilities of Dizful. An evening or two later, as he loitered on the bridge watching a string of loaded camels, a respectable-looking old gentleman in a black *aba* addressed him in French. French in Dizful! And it appeared that this remarkable Elamite was a Jew, who had picked up in Baghdad the idiom of Paris! He went on to describe himself as the "agent" of a distinguished foreign resident, who, the linguistic old gentleman gave Matthews to understand, languished for a sight of the new-comer, and was unable to understand why he had not already been favored with a call. His pain was the deeper because the newcomer had recently enjoyed the hospitality of this distinguished foreign resident on a little yacht on the river.

"The unmitigated bounder!" exclaimed Matthews, unable to deliver himself in French of that sentiment, and turning upon the stupefied old gentleman a rude Anglo-Saxon back. "He has cheek enough for anything."

He had enough, at any rate, to knock the next afternoon, unannounced, on Matthews' gate, to follow Matthews' servant into the house without waiting to hear whether Matthews would receive him, to present himself at the door of the dim underground *serdab* where Matthews lounged in his pajamas till it should be cool enough

to go out, to make Matthews the most ceremonious of bows, and to give that young man a half-amused, half-annoyed consciousness of being put at his ease. The advantage of position, Matthews had good reason to feel, was with himself. He knew more about the bounder than the bounder thought, and it was not he who had knocked at the bounder's gate. Yet the sound of that knock, peeling muffled through the hot silence, had been distinctly welcome. Nor could our incipient connoisseur of rum towns pretend that the sight of Magin bowing in the doorway was wholly unwelcome, so long had he been stewing there in the sun by himself. What annoyed him, what amused him, what in spite of himself impressed him, was to see how the bounder ignored advantages of position. Matthews had forgotten, too, what an imposing individual the bounder really was. And measuring his tall figure, listening to his deep voice, looking at his light eyes and his two sinister scars and the big shaved dome of a head which he this time uncovered, our cool enough young man wondered whether there might be something more than fantastic about this navigator of strange waters. It was rather odd, at all events, how he kept bobbing up, and what a power he had of quickening — what? A school-boyish sense of the romantic? Or mere vulgar curiosity? For he suddenly found himself aware, Guy Matthews, that what he knew about his visitor was less than what he desired to know.

The visitor made no haste, however, to volunteer any information. Nor did he make of Matthews any but the most perfunctory inquiries.

"And Monsieur — What was his name? Your Frenchman?" he continued.

"Gaston. He's not my Frenchman, though," replied Matthews. "He went back long ago."

"Oh!" uttered Magin. He declined the refreshments which Abbas at that point produced, even to the cigarette Matthews offered him. He merely glanced at the make. Then he examined, with a flicker of amusement

in his eyes, the bare white-washed room. A runnel of water trickled across it in a stone channel that widened in the centre into a shallow pool. "A bit of a lark, eh? I remember that *mot* of yours, Mr. Matthews. To sit steaming, or perhaps I should say dreaming, in a sort of Turkish bath in the bottom of Elam while over there in Europe —"

"Is there anything new?" asked Matthews, recognizing his caller's habit of finishing a sentence with a gesture. "Archdukes and that sort of thing don't seem to matter much in Dizful. I have even lost track of the date."

"I would not have thought an Englishman so — *dolce far niente*," said Magin. "It is perhaps because we archæologists feed on dates! I happen to recollect, though, that we first met on the eighteenth of July. And to-day, if you would like to know, is Saturday, the first of August, 1914." The flicker of amusement in his eyes became something more inscrutable. "But there is a telegraph even in Elam," he went on. "A little news trickles out of it now and then. Don't you ever catch, perhaps, some echo of the trickle?"

"That's not my idea of a lark," laughed Matthews.

Magin regarded him a moment.

"Well," he conceded, "Europe does take on a new perspective from the point of view of Susa. I see you are a philosopher, sitting amidst the ruins of empires and wisely preferring the trickle of your fountain to the trickle of the telegraph. If Austria falls to pieces, if Serbia reaches the Adriatic, what is that to us? Nothing but a story that in Elam has been told too often to have any novelty! Eh?"

"Why," asked Matthews, quickly, "is that on already?"

Magin looked at him again a moment before answering.

"Not yet! But why," he added, "do you say already?"

His voice had a curious rumble in the dim stone room.

Matthews wondered whether it were because the acoustic properties of a *serdab* in Dizful differ from those of a galley on the Karun, or whether there really were something new about him.

“Why, it’s bound to come sooner or later, isn’t it? If it’s true that all the way from Nish to Ragusa those chaps speak the same language and belong to the same race, one can hardly blame them for wanting to do what the Italians and the Germans have already done. And, as a philosopher sitting amidst the ruins of empires, wouldn’t you say yourself that Austria has bitten off rather more than she can chew?”

“Very likely I should.” Magin took a cigar out of his pocket, snipped off the end with a patent cutter, lighted it, and regarded the smoke with a growing look of amusement. “But,” he went on, “as a philosopher sitting amidst the ruins of empires, I would hardly confine that observation to Austria-Hungary. For instance, I have heard”—and his look of amusement verged on a smile—“of an island in the Atlantic Ocean not much larger than the land of Elam, an island of rains and fogs whose people, feeling the need of a little more sunlight perhaps, or of pin-money and elbow-room, sailed away and conquered for themselves two entire continents, as well as a good part of a third. I have also heard that the inhabitants of this island, not content with killing and enslaving so many defenseless fellow-creatures, or with picking up any lesser island, cape, or bay that happened to suit their fancy, took it upon themselves to govern several hundred million unwilling individuals of all colors and religions in other parts of the world. And, having thus procured both sunlight and elbow-room, those enterprising islanders assumed a virtuous air and pushed the high cries—as our friend Gaston would say—if any of their neighbors ever showed the slightest symptom of following their very successful example. Have you ever heard of such an island? And would you not say—as a philosopher sitting amidst the ruins

of empires — that it had also bitten off rather more than it could chew?"

Matthews, facing the question and the now open smile, felt that he wanted to be cool, but that he did not altogether succeed.

"I dare say that two or three hundred years ago we did things we wouldn't do now. Times have changed in all sorts of ways. But we never set out like a Cæsar or a Napoleon or a Bismarck to invent an empire. It all came about quite naturally. Anybody else could have done the same. But nobody else thought of it — at the time. We simply got there first."

"Ah?" Magin smiled more broadly. "It seems to me that I have heard of another island, not so far from here, which is no more than a pin-point, to be sure, but which happens to be the key of the Persian Gulf. I have also heard that the Portuguese got there first, as you put it. But you crushed Portugal, you crushed Spain, you crushed Holland, you crushed France — or you meant to. And I must say it looks to me as if you would not mind crushing Germany. Why do you go on building ships, building ships, building ships, always two to Germany's one? Simply that you and your friends can go on eating up Asia and Africa — and perhaps Germany too!"

Matthews noticed that the elder man ended, at any rate, not quite so coolly as he began.

"Nonsense! The thing's so simple it isn't worth repeating. We have to have more ships than anybody else because our empire is bigger than anybody else's — and more scattered. As for eating, it strikes me that Germany has done more of that lately than any one. However, if you know so much about islands, you must also know how we happened to go into India — or Egypt. In the beginning it was pure accident. And you know very well that if we left them to-morrow there would be the devil to pay. Do we get a penny out of them?"

"Oh, no!" laughed Magin. "You administer them

purely on altruistic principles, for their own good and that of the world at large — like the oil-wells of the Karun!”

“Well, since you put it that way,” laughed Matthews in turn, “perhaps we do!”

Magin shrugged his shoulders.

“Extraordinary people! Do you really think the rest of the world so stupid? Or it is that the fog of your island has got into your brains? You always talk about truth as if it were a patented British invention, yet no one is less willing to call a spade a spade. Look at Cairo, where you pretend to keep nothing but a consul-general, but where the ruler of the country can't turn over in bed without his permission. A consul-general! Look at your novels! Look at what you yourself are saying to me!”

Matthews lighted a pipe over it.

“In a way, of course, you are right,” he said. “But I am not sure that we are altogether wrong. Spades exist, but there's no inherent virtue in talking about them. In fact it's often better not to mention them at all. There's something very funny about words, you know. They so often turn out to mean more than you expected.”

At that Magin regarded his companion with a new interest.

“I would not have thought you knew that, at your age! But after all, if you will allow me to say so, it is a woman's point of view. A man ought to say things out — and stick by them. He is less likely to get into trouble afterward. For example, it would have been not only more honest but more advantageous for your country if you had openly annexed Egypt in the beginning. Now where are you? You continually have to explain, and to watch very sharply lest some other consul-general tell the Khedive to turn over in bed. And since you and the Russians intend to eat up Persia, why on earth don't you do it frankly, instead of trying not to frighten the Per-

sians, and talking vaguely about spheres of influence, neutral zones, and what not? I'm afraid the truth is that you're getting old and fat. What?" He glanced over his cigar at Matthews, who was regarding the trickle of the water beside them. "Those Russians, they are younger," he went on. "They have still to be reckoned with. And they aren't so squeamish, either in novels or in life. Look at what they have done in their 'sphere.' They have roads, they have Cossacks, they have the Shah under their thumb. And whenever they choose they shut the Baghdad train against your caravans — yours, with whom they have an understanding! A famous understanding! You don't even understand how to make the most of your own sphere. You have had the Karun in your hands for three hundred years, and what have you done with it? Why, in heaven's name, didn't you blast out that rock at Ahwaz long ago? Why haven't you made a proper road to Isfahan? Why don't you build that railroad to Khorremabad that you are always talking about, and finish it before the Germans get to Baghdad? Ah! If they had been here in your place you would have seen!"

"It strikes me," retorted Matthews, with less coolness than he had yet shown, "that you are here already — from what the Father of the Swords told me." And he looked straight at the man who had told him that an Englishman couldn't call a spade a spade. But he saw anew how that man could ignore an advantage of position.

Magin returned the look — frankly, humorously, quizzically. Then he said:

"You remind me, by the way, of a question I came to ask you. Would you object to telling me what you are up to here?"

"What am I up to?" queried Matthews, in astonishment. The cheek of the bounder was really beyond everything! "What do you mean?"

Magin smiled.

"I am not an Englishman. I mean what I say."

"No you're not!" Matthews threw back at him. "No Englishman would try to pass himself off for a Brazilian."

Magin smiled again.

"Nor would a German jump too hastily at conclusions. If I told you I was from Brazil, I spoke the truth. I was born there, as were many Englishmen I know. That makes them very little less English, and it has perhaps made me more German. Who knows? As a philosopher sitting with you amidst the ruins of empires I am at least inclined to believe that we take our mother country more seriously than you do yours! But to return to our point: what are you doing here?"

"I'm attending to my business. Which seems to me more than you are doing, Mr. Magin."

Matthews noticed, from the reverberation of the room, that his voice must have been unnecessarily loud. He busied himself with the bowl of his pipe. As for Magin, he got up and began walking to and fro, drawing at his cigar. The red of it showed how much darker the room had been growing. It increased, too, the curious effect of his eyes. They looked like two empty holes in a mask.

"Eh, too bad!" sighed the visitor at last. "You disappoint me. Do you know? You are, of course, much younger than I; but you made me hope that you were perhaps—how shall I put it?—a spirit of the first class. I hoped that without padding, without rancor, like true philosophers, we might exchange our points of view. However— Since it suits you to stand on your dignity, I must say that I am very distinctly attending to my business. And I am obliged to add that it does not help my business, Mr. Matthews, to have you sitting so mysteriously in Dizful—and refusing to call on me, but occasionally calling on nomad chiefs. I confess that you don't look to me like a spy. Spies are generally older men than you, more cooked, as Gaston would say, more fluent in languages. It does not seem

to me, either, that even an English spy would go about his affairs quite as you have done. Still, I regret to have to repeat that I dislike your idea of a lark. And not only because you upset nomad chiefs. You upset other people as well. You might even end up by upsetting yourself."

"Who the devil are you?" demanded Matthews, hotly. "The Emperor of Elam?"

"Ha! I see you are acquainted with the excellent Adolf Ganz!" laughed Magin. "No," he went on in another tone. "His viceroy, perhaps. But as I was saying, it does not suit me to have you stopping here. I can see, however, that you have reason to be surprised, possibly annoyed, at my telling you so. I am willing to be reasonable about it. How much do you want — for the expenses of your going away?"

Matthews could hardly believe his ears. He got up in turn.

"What in hell do you mean by that?"

"I am sorry, Mr. Matthews," answered the other, slowly, "that my knowledge of your language does not permit me to make myself clear to you. Perhaps you will understand me better if I quote from yourself. I got here first. Did you ever put your foot into this country until two weeks ago? Did your countrymen ever trouble themselves about it, even after Layard showed them the way? No! They expressly left it outside of their famous 'sphere,' in that famous neutral zone. And all these centuries it has been lying here in the sun, asleep, forgotten, deserted, lost, given over to nomads and to lions — until I came. I am the first European since Alexander the Great who has seen what it might be. It is not so impossible that I might open again those choked-up canals which once made these burnt plains a paradise. In those mountains I have found — what I have found. What right have you to interfere with me, who are only out for a lark? Or

what right have your countrymen? They have already, as you so gracefully express it, bitten off so much more than they can chew. The Gulf, the Karun, the oil-wells — they are yours. Take them. But Baghdad is ours: if not today, then tomorrow. And if you will exercise that logical process of which your British mind appears to be not altogether destitute, you can hardly help seeing that this part of your famous neutral zone, if not the whole of it, falls into the sphere of Baghdad. You know, too, that we do things more thoroughly than you. Therefore I must very respectfully but very firmly ask you, at your very earliest convenience, to leave Dizful. I am quite willing to believe, however, that your interference with my arrangements was accidental. And I dislike to put you to any unnecessary trouble. So I shall be happy to compensate you, in marks, *tomans*, or pounds sterling, for any disappointment you may feel in bringing this particular lark to an end. Do you now understand me? How much do you want?"

He perceived, Guy Matthews, that his lark had indeed taken an unexpected turn. He was destined, far sooner than he dreamed, to be asked of life, and to answer, questions even more direct than this. But until now life had chosen to confront him with no problem more pressing than one of cricket or hunting. He was therefore troubled by an unwonted confusion of feelings. For he felt that his ordinary vocabulary — made up of such substantives as lark, cheek, and bounder, and the comprehensive adjective "rum" — fell short of coping with this extraordinary speech. He even felt that he might possibly have answered in a different way, but for that unspeakable offer of money. And the rumble of Magin's bass in the dark stone room somehow threw a light on the melancholy land without, somehow gave him a dim sense that he did not answer for himself alone — that he answered for the tradition of Layard and Rawlinson and Morier and Sherley, of Clive and Kitchener, of Drake and

Raleigh and Nelson, of all the adventurous young men of that beloved foggy island at which this pseudo-Brazilian jeered.

"When I first met you in the river, Mr. Magin," he said, quietly, "I confess I did not realize how much of the spoils of Susa you were carrying away in your chests. And I didn't take your gold anklet as a bribe, though I didn't take you for too much of a gentleman in offering it to me. But all I have to say now is that I shall stay in Dizful as long as I please — and that you had better clear out of this house unless you want me to kick you out."

"Heroics, eh? You obstinate little fool! I could choke you with one hand!"

"You'd better try!" shouted Matthews.

He started in spite of himself when a muffled boom suddenly answered him, jarring even the sunken walls of the room. Then he remembered that voice of the drowsing city, bursting out with the pent-up brew of the day.

"Ah!" exclaimed Magin strangely — "The cannon speaks at last! You will hear, beside your fountain, what it has to say. That, at any rate, you will perhaps understand — you and the people of your island." He stopped a moment. "But," he went on, "if some fasting dervish knocks you on the head with his mace, or sticks his knife into your back, don't say I didn't warn you!"

And the echo of his receding stamp in the corridor drowned for a moment the trickle of the invisible water.

V

The destiny of some men lies coiled within them, invisible as the blood of their hearts or the stuff of their will, working darkly, day by day and year after year, for their glory or for their destruction. The destiny of other men is an accident, a god from the machine or an enemy in ambush. Such was the destiny of Guy Matthews, as it was of how many other unsuspecting young men of his time. It would have been inconceivable to him, as he

stood in his dark stone room listening to Magin's receding stamp, that anything could make him do what Magin demanded. Yet something did it — the last drop of the strange essence Dizful had been brewing for him.

The letter that accomplished this miracle came to him by the hand of a Bakhtiari from Meidan-i-Naft. It said very little. It said so little, and that little so briefly, that Matthews, still preoccupied with his own quarrel, at first saw no reason why a stupid war on the Continent, and the consequent impossibility of telegraphing home except by way of India, should affect the oil-works, or why his friends should put him in the position of showing Magin the white feather. But as he turned over the Bakhtiari's scrap of paper the meaning of it grew, in the light of the very circumstances that made him hesitate, so portentously that he sent Abbas for horses. And before the Ramazan gun boomed again he was well on his way back to Meidan-i-Naft.

There was something unreal to him about that night ride eastward across the dusty moonlit plain. He never forgot that night. The unexpectedness of it was only a part of the unreality. What pulled him up short was a new quality in the general unexpectedness of life. Life had always been, like the trip from which he was returning, more or less of a lark. Whereas it suddenly appeared that life might, perhaps, be very little of a lark. So far as he had ever pictured life to himself he had seen it as an extension of his ordered English countryside, beset by no hazard more searching than a hawthorne hedge. But the plain across which he rode gave him a new picture of it, lighted romantically enough by the moon, yet offering a rider magnificent chances to break his neck in some invisible nullah, if not to be waylaid by marauding Lurs or lions. It even began to come to this not too articulate young man that romance and reality might be the same thing, romance being what happens to the other fellow and reality being what happens to you. He looked up at the moon of war that had been heralded to him by cannon

and tried to imagine what, under that same moon far away in Europe, was happening to the other fellow. For it was entirely on the cards that it might also happen to him, Guy Matthews, who had gone up the Ab-i-Diz for a lark! That his experience had an extraordinary air of having happened to some one else, as he went back in his mind to his cruise on the river, his meeting with the barge, his first glimpse of Dizful, the interlude of Bala Bala, the return to Dizful, the cannon, Magin. Magin! He was extraordinary enough, in all conscience, as Matthews tried to piece together, under his romantic-realistic moon, the various unrelated fragments his memory produced of that individual, connoisseur of Greek kylixes and Lur nose-jewels, quoter of Scripture and secret agent.

The bounder must have known, as he sat smoking his cigar and ironizing on the ruins of empires, that the safe and settled little world to which they both belonged was already in a blaze. Of course he had known it — and he had said nothing about it! But not least extraordinary was the way the bounder, whom after all Matthews had only seen twice, seemed to color the whole adventure. In fact, he had been the first speck in the blue, the forerunner — if Matthews had only seen it — of the more epic adventure into which he was so quickly to be caught.

At Shuster he broke his journey. There were still thirty miles to do, and fresh horses were to be hired — of some fasting *charvadar* who would never consent in Ramazan, Matthews very well knew, to start for Meidan-i-Naft under the terrific August sun. But he was not ungrateful for a chance to rest. He discovered in himself, too, a sudden interest in all the trickle of the telegraph. And he was anxious to pick up what news he could from the few Europeans in the town. Moreover, he needed to see Ganz about the replenishing of his money-bag; for not the lightest item of the traveler's pack in Persia is his load of silver *krans*.

At the telegraph office Matthews ran into Ganz him-

self. The Swiss was a short, fair, faded man, not too neat about his white clothes, with a pensive mustache and an ambiguous blue eye that lighted at sight of the young Englishman. The light, however, was not one to illuminate Matthews' darkness in the matter of news. What news trickled out of the local wire was very meager indeed. The Austrians were shelling Belgrade, the Germans, the Russians, and the French had gone in. That was all. No, not quite all; for the bank-rate in England had suddenly jumped sky-high — higher, at any rate, than it had ever jumped before. And even Shuster felt the distant commotion, in that the bazaar had already seen fit to put up the price of sugar and petroleum. Not that Shuster showed any outward sign of commotion as the two threaded their way toward Ganz's house. The deserted streets reminded Matthews strangely of Dizful. What was stranger was to find how they reminded him of a chapter that is closed. He hardly noticed the blank walls, the archways of brick and tile, the tall *badgirs*, even the filth and smells. But strangest was it to listen to the hot silence, to look up at the brilliant stripe of blue between the adobe walls, while over there —!

The portentous uncertainty of what might be over there made his answers to Ganz's questions about his journey curt and abstracted. He gave no explanation of his failure to see the celebration at Bala Bala and the ruins of Susa, which Ganz supposed to be the chief objects of his excursion. Yet he found himself looking with a new eye at the anomalous exile whom the Father of Swords called the prince among the merchants of Shuster, noting the faded untidy air as he had never noted it before, wondering why a man should bury himself in such a hole as this. Was one now, he speculated, to look at everybody all over again? He was not the kind of man, Ganz, to interest the Guy Matthews who had gone to Dizful. But it was the Guy Matthews who came back from Dizful who didn't like Ganz's name or Ganz's good enough accent. Nevertheless he yielded to Ganz's insist-

ence, when they reached the office and the money-bag had been restored to its normal portliness, that the traveler should step into the house to rest and cool off.

"Do come!" urged the Swiss. "I so seldom see a civilized being. And I have a new piano!" he threw in as an added inducement. "Do you play?"

He had no parlor tricks, he told Ganz, and he told himself that he wanted to get on. But Ganz had been very decent to him, after all. And he began to perceive that he himself was extremely tired. So he followed Ganz through the cloister of the pool to the court where the great basin glittered in the sun, below the pillared portico.

"Who is that?" exclaimed Ganz suddenly. "What a tone, eh? And what a touch!"

Matthews heard from Ganz's private quarters a welling of music so different from the pipes and cow-horns of Dizful that it gave him a sudden stab of homesickness.

"I say," he said, brightening, "could it be any of the fellows from Meidan-i-Naft?"

The ambiguous blue eye brightened too.

"Perhaps! It is the river music from *Rheingold*. But listen," Ganz added with a smile. "There are sharks among the Rhine maidens!"

They went on, up the steps of the portico, to the door which Ganz opened softly, stepping aside for his visitor to pass in. The room was so dark, after the blinding light of the court, that Matthews saw nothing at first. He stepped forward eagerly, feeling his way among Ganz's tables and chairs toward the end of the room from which the music came. They gave him, the clattering tables and chairs, after the empty rooms he had been living in, a sharper renewal of his stab. And even a piano—! It made him think of Kipling and the *Song of the Banjo*:

"I am memory and torment — I am Town!
I am all that ever went with evening dress!"

But what mute inglorious Paderewski of the restricted circle he had moved in for the past months was capable

of such parlor tricks as this? Then, suddenly, he saw. He saw, swaying back and forth against the dark background of the piano, a domed shaven head that made him stop short—that head full of so many astounding things! He saw, traveling swiftly up and down the keys, rising above them to an extravagant height and pouncing down upon them again, those predatory hands that had pounced on the spoils of Susa! They began, in a moment, to flutter lightly over the upper end of the keyboard. It was extraordinary what a ripple poured as if out of those hands. Magin himself bent over to listen to the ripple, partly showing his face as he turned his ear to the keys. He showed, too, in the lessening gloom, a smile Matthews had never seen before, more extraordinary than anything. Yet even as Matthews watched it, in his stupefaction, the smile changed, broadened, hardened. And Magin, sitting up straight again with his back to the room, began to execute a series of crashing chords.

After several minutes he stopped and swung around on the piano-stool. Ganz clapped his hands, shouting "Bis! Bis!" At that Magin rose, bowed elaborately, and kissed his hands right and left. He ended by pulling up a table-cover near him, gazing intently under the table.

"Have you lost something?" inquired Ganz.

"I seem," answered Magin, "to have lost half my audience. What has become of our elusive English friend? Am I so unfortunate as to have been unable to satisfy his refined ear? Or can it be that his emotions were too much for him?"

"He was in a hurry," explained Ganz. "He is just back from Dizful, you know."

"Ah?" uttered Magin. "He is a very curious young man. He is always in a hurry. He was in a hurry the first time I had the pleasure of meeting him. He was in such a hurry at Bala Bala that he didn't wait to see the celebration which you told me he went to see. He also left Dizful in a surprising hurry, from what I hear.

I happen to know that the telegraph had nothing to do with it. I can only conclude that some one frightened him away. Where do you suppose he hurries to? And do you think he will arrive in time?"

Ganz opened his mouth; but if he intended to say something, he decided instead to draw his hand across his spare jaw. However, he did speak after all.

"I notice that you at least do not hurry, Majesty! Do you fiddle while Rome burns?"

"Ha!" laughed Magin. "It is not Rome that burns! And I notice, Mr. Ganz, that you seem to be of a forgetful as well as of an inquiring disposition. I would have been in Mohamera long ago if it had not been for your son of Papa, with his interest in unspoiled towns. I will thank you to issue no more letters to the Father of Swords without remembering me. Do you wish to enrich the already overstocked British Museum at my expense? But I do not mind revealing to you that I am now really on my way to Mohamera."

"H'm," let out Ganz slowly. "My dear fellow, haven't you heard that there is a war in Europe?"

"I must confess, my good Ganz, that I have. But what has Europe to do with Mohamera?"

"God knows," said Ganz. "I should think, however, since you are so far from the Gulf, that you would prefer the route of Baghdad—now that French and Russian cruisers are seeking whom they may devour."

"You forget, Mr. Ganz, that I am so fortunate as to possess a number of valuable objects of virtue. I would think twice before attempting to carry those objects of virtue through the country of our excellent friends the Beni Lam Arabs!"

Ganz laughed.

"Your objects of virtue could very well be left with me. What if the English should go into the war?"

"The English? Go into the war? Never fear! This is not their affair. And if it were, what could they do? Sail their famous ships up the Rhine and the Elbe? Be-

sides, that treacherous memory of yours seems to fail you again. This is Persia, not England."

"Perhaps," answered Ganz. "But the English are very funny people. There is a rumor, you know, of pourparlers. What if you were to sail down to the gulf and some little midshipman were to fire a shot across your bow?"

"Ah, bah! I am a neutral! And Britannia is a fat old woman! Also a rich one, who doesn't put her hand into her pocket to please her neighbors. Besides, I have a little affair with the Sheikh of Mohamera — objects of virtue, indigo, who knows what? As you know, I am a versatile man." And swinging around on his stool, Magin began to play again.

"But even fat old women sometimes know how to bite," objected Ganz.

"Not when their teeth have dropped out," Magin threw over his shoulder — "or when strong young men plug their jaws!"

VI

Two days later, or not quite three days later, the galley and the motor-boat whose accidental encounter brought about the events of this narrative met again. This second meeting took place in the Karun, as before, but at a point some fifty or sixty miles below Bund-i-Kir. And now the moon, not the sun, cast its paler glitter between the high dark banks of the stream. It was a keen-eared young Lur who first heard afar the pant of the mysterious jinni. Before he or his companions descried the motor-boat, however, Gaston, rounding a sharp curve above the island of Umm-un-Nakhl, caught sight of the sweeps of the barge flashing in the moonlight. The unexpected view of that flash was not disagreeable to Gaston. For, as Gaston put it to himself, he was sad — despite the efforts of his friend, the telegraph operator at Ahwaz, to cheer him up. It is true that the operator,

who was Irish and a man of heart, had accorded him but a limited amount of cheer, together with hard words not a few. Recalling them, Gaston picked up a knife that lay on the seat beside him — an odd curved knife of the country, in a leather sheath. There is no reason why I should conceal the fact that this knife was a gift from Gaston's Bakhtiari henchman, who had presented it to Gaston, with immense solemnity, on hearing that there was a war in Firengistan and that the young men of the oil works were going to it. What had become of that type of a Bakhtiari, Gaston wondered? Then, spying the flash of those remembered oars, he bethought him of the seigneur of a Brazilian whose hospitable yacht, he had reason to know, was not destitute of cheer.

When he was near enough the barge to make out the shadow of the high beak on the moonlit water he cut off the motor. The sweeps forthwith ceased to flash. Gaston then called out the customary salutation. It was answered, as before, by the deep voice of the Brazilian. He stood at the rail of the barge as the motor-boat glided alongside.

"Ah, *mon vieux*, you are alone this time?" said Magin genially. "Where are the others?"

"I do not figure to myself," answered Gaston, "that you derange yourself to inquire for my sacred devil of a Bakhtiari, who has taken the key of the fields. As for Monsieur Guy, the Englishman you saw the other time, whose name does not pronounce itself, he has gone to the war. I just took him and three others to Ahwaz, where they meet more of their friends and all go together on the steamer to Mohamera."

"Really! And did you hear any news at Ahwaz?"

"The latest is that England has declared war."

"Tiens!" exclaimed Magin. His voice was extraordinarily loud and deep in the stillness of the river. It impressed Gaston, who sat looking up at the dark figure in front of the ghostly Lurs. What types, with their black hats of a theater! He hoped the absence of M'sieu

Guy and the Brazilian's evident surprise would not cloud the latter's hospitality. He was accordingly gratified to hear the Brazilian say, after a moment: "And they tell us that madness is not catching! But we, at least, have not lost our heads. Eh? To prove it, Monsieur Gaston, will you not come aboard a moment, if you are not in too much of a hurry, and drink a little glass with me?"

Gaston needed no urging. In a trice he had tied his boat to the barge and was on the deck. The agreeable Brazilian was not too much of a seigneur to shake his hand in welcome, or to lead him into the cabin where a young Lur was in the act of lighting candles.

"It is so hot, and so many strange beasts fly about this river," Magin explained, "that I usually prefer to travel without a light. But we must see the way to our mouths! What will you have? Beer? Bordeaux? Champagne?"

Gaston considered this serious question with attention.

"Since Monsieur has the goodness to inquire, if Monsieur has any of that *fine champagne* I tasted before—"

"Ah yes! Certainly." And he gave a rapid order to the Lur. Then he stood silent, his eyes fixed on the reed portière. Gaston was more impressed than ever as he stood too, *béret* in hand, looking around the little saloon, so oddly, yet so comfortably fitted out with rugs and skins. Presently the Lur reappeared through the reed portière, which aroused the Brazilian from his abstraction. He filled the two glasses himself, waving his attendant out of the cabin, and handed one to Gaston. The other he raised in the air, bowing to his guest. "To the victor!" he said. "And sit down, won't you? There is more than one glass in that bottle."

Gaston was enchanted to sit down and to sip another cognac.

"But, Monsieur," he exclaimed, looking about again, "you travel like an emperor!"

"Ho!" laughed Magin, with a quick glance at Gaston. "I am well enough here. But there is one difficulty."

He looked at his glass, holding it up to the light. "I travel too slowly."

Gaston smiled.

"In Persia, who cares?"

"Well, it happens that at this moment I do. I have affairs at Mohamera. And in this tub it will take me three days more at the best — without considering that I shall have to wait till daylight to get through the rocks at Ahwaz." He lowered his glass and looked back at Gaston. "Tell me: Why shouldn't you take me down, ahead of my tub? Eh? Or to Sablah, if Mohamera is too far? It would not delay you so much, after all. You can tell them any story you like at Sheleilieh. Otherwise I am sure we can make a satisfactory arrangement." He put his hand suggestively into his pocket.

Gaston considered it between sips. It really was not much to do for this uncle of America who had been so amiable. And others had suddenly become so much less amiable than their wont. Moreover that Bakhtiari — he might repent when he heard the motor again. At any rate one could say that one had waited for him. And the Brazilian would no doubt show a gratitude so handsome that one could afford to be a little independent. If those on the steamer asked any questions when the motor-boat passed, surely the Brazilian, who was more of a seigneur than any employee of an oil company, would know how to answer.

"*Allons!* Why not?" he said aloud.

"Bravo!" cried the Brazilian, withdrawing his hand from his pocket. "Take that as part of my ticket. And excuse me a moment while I make arrangements."

He disappeared through the reed portière, leaving Gaston to admire five shining napoleons. It gave him an odd sensation to see, after so long, those coins of his country: When Magin finally came back, it was through the inner door.

"Tell me: how much can you carry?" he asked. "I have four boxes I would like to take with me, besides a

few small things. These fools might wreck themselves at Ahwaz and lose everything in the river. It would annoy me very much — after all the trouble I have had to collect my objects of virtue! Besides, the tub will get through more easily without them. Come in and see.”

“*Mon Dieu!*” exclaimed Gaston, scratching his head, when he saw. “My boat won’t get through more easily with them, especially at night.” He looked curiously around the cozy stateroom.

“But it will take them, eh? If necessary, we can land them at Ahwaz and have them carried around the rapids.”

The thing took some manœuvering; but the Lurs, with the help of much fluent profanity from the master, finally accomplished it without sinking the motor-boat. Gaston, sitting at the wheel to guard his precious engine against some clumsiness of the black-hatted mountaineers, looked on with humorous astonishment at this turn of affairs. He was destined, it appeared, to be disappointed in his hope of cheer. That cognac was really very good — if only one had had more of it. Still, one at least had company now; and he was not the man to be insensible to the fine champagne of the unexpected. Nor was he unconscious that of many baroque scenes at which he had assisted, this was not the least baroque.

When the fourth chest had gingerly been lowered into place, Magin vanished again. Presently he reappeared, followed by his majordomo, to whom he gave instructions in a low voice. Then he stepped into the stern of the boat. The majordomo, taking two portmanteaux and a rug from the Lurs behind him, handed them down to Gaston. Having disposed of them, Gaston stood up, his eyes on the Lurs who crowded the rail.

“Well, my friend,” said Magin gaily, “for whom are you waiting? We shall yet have opportunities to admire the romantic scenery of the Karun!”

“Ah! Monsieur takes no — other object of virtue with him?”

"Have you so much room?" laughed Magin. "It is a good thing there is no wind to-night. Go ahead."

Gaston cast off, backed a few feet, reversed, and described a wide circle around the stern of the barge. It made a strange picture in the moonlight, with its black-curved beak and its spectral crew. They shifted to the other rail as the motor-boat came about, watching silently.

"To your oars!" shouted Magin at them. "Row, sons of burnt fathers! Will you have me wait a month for you at Mohamera?"

They scattered to their places, and Gaston caught the renewed flash of the sweeps as he turned to steer for the bend. It was a good thing, he told himself, that there was no wind to-night. The gunwale was nearer the water than he or the boat cared for. She made nothing like her usual speed. However, he said nothing. Neither did Magin — until the dark shadow of Umm-un-Nakhl divided the glitter in front of them.

"Take the narrower channel," he ordered then. And when they were in it he added: "Stop, will you, and steer in there, under the shadow of the shore? I think we would better fortify ourselves for the work of the night. I at least did not forget the cognac, among my other objects of virtue."

They fortified themselves accordingly, the Brazilian producing cigars as well. He certainly was an original, thought Gaston, now hopeful of experiencing actual cheer. That originality proved itself anew when, after a much longer period of refreshment than would suit most gentlemen in a hurry, the familiar flash became visible in the river behind them.

"Now be quiet," commanded the extraordinary uncle of America. "Whatever happens we mustn't let them hear us. If they take this channel, we will slip down, and run part way up the other. We shall give them a little surprise."

Nearer and nearer came the flash, which suddenly went

out behind the island. A recurrent splash succeeded it, and a wild melancholy singing. The singing and the recurrent splash grew louder, filled the silence of the river, grew softer; and presently the receding oars flashed again, below the island. But not until the last glint was lost in the shimmer of the water, the last sound had died out of the summer night, did the Brazilian begin to unfold his surprise.

"Que diable allait-on faire dans cette galère!" he exclaimed. "It's the first time I ever knew them to do the right thing! Let us drink one more little glass to the good fortune of their voyage. And here, by the way, is another part of my ticket." He handed Gaston five more napoleons. "But now, my friend, we have some work. I see we shall never get anywhere with all this load. Let us therefore consign our objects of virtue to the safe keeping of the river. He will guard them better than anybody. Is it deep enough here?"

It was deep enough. But what an affair, getting those heavy chests overboard! The last one nearly pulled Magin in with it. One of the clamps caught in his clothes, threw him against the side of the boat, and jerked something after it into the water. He sat down, swearing softly to himself, to catch his breath and investigate the damage.

"It was only my revolver," he announced. "And we have no need of that, since we are not going to the war! Now, my good Gaston, I have changed my mind. We will not go down the river, after all. We will go up."

Gaston, this time, stared at him.

"Up? But, Monsieur, the barge —"

"What is my barge to you, dear Gaston? Besides, it is no longer mine. It now belongs to the Sheikh of Mohamera — with whatever objects of virtue it still contains. He has long teased me for it. And none of them can read the note they are carrying to him! Didn't I tell you I was going to give them a little surprise? Well,

there it is. I am not a man, you see, to be tied to objects of virtue. Which reminds me: where are my port-manteaux?"

"Here, on the tank."

"Fi! And you a chauffeur! Give them to me. I will arrange myself a little. As for you, turn around and see how quickly you can carry me to the charming resort of Bund-i-Kir — where Antigonus fought Eumenes and the Silver Shields for the spoils of Susa, and won them. Did you ever hear, Gaston, of that interesting incident?"

"Monsieur is too strong for me," replied Gaston, cryptically. He took off his cap, wiped his face, and sat down at the wheel.

"If a man is not strong, what is he?" rejoined Magin. "But you will not find this cigar too strong," he added amicably.

Gaston did not. What he found strong was the originality of his passenger — and the way that cognac failed, in spite of its friendly warmth, to cheer him. For he kept thinking of that absurd Bakhtiari, and of the telegraph operator, and of M'sieu Guy, and the others, as he sped northward on the silent moonlit river.

"This is very well, eh, Gaston?" uttered the Brazilian at last. "We march better without our objects of virtue." Gaston felt that he smiled as he lay smoking on his rug in the bottom of the boat. "But tell me," he went on presently, "how is it, if I may ask, that you didn't happen to go in the steamer too, with your Monsieur Guy? You do not look to me either old or incapable."

There it was, the same question, which really seemed to need no answer at first, but which somehow became harder to answer every time! Why was it? And how could it spoil so good a cognac?

"How is it?" repeated Gaston. "It is, Monsieur, that France is a great lady who does not derange herself for a simple vagabond like Gaston, or about whose liaisons or quarrels it is not for Gaston to concern himself.

This great lady has naturally not asked my opinion about this quarrel. But if she had, I would have told her that it is very stupid for everybody in Europe to begin shooting at each other. Why? Simply because it pleases *ces messieurs* the Austrians to treat *ces messieurs* the Serbs *de haut en bas!* What have I to do with that? Besides, this great lady is very far away, and by the time I arrive she will have arranged her affair. In the meantime there are many others, younger and more capable than I, whose express business it is to arrange such affairs. Will one *piou-piou* more or less change the result of one battle? Of course not! And if I should lose my hand or my head, who would buy me another? Not France! I have seen a little what France does in such cases. My own father left his leg at Gravelotte, together with his job and my mother's peace. I have seen what happened to her, and how it is that I am a vagabond — about whom France has never troubled herself." He shouted it over his shoulder, above the noise of the motor, with an increasing loudness. "Also," he went on, "I have duties not so far away as France. Up there, at Sheleilieh, there will perhaps be next month a little Gaston. If I go away, who will feed him? I have not the courage of Monsieur, who separates himself so easily from objects of virtue. *Voilà!*"

Magin said nothing for a moment. Then:

"Courage, yes! One needs a little courage in this curious world." There was a pause, as the boat cut around a dark curve. "But do not think, my poor Gaston, that it is I who blame you. On the contrary, I find you very reasonable — more reasonable than many ministers of state. If others in Europe had been able to express themselves like you, Gaston, Monsieur Guy and his friends would not have run away so suddenly. It takes courage, too, not to run after them." He made a sound, as if changing his position, and presently he began to sing softly to himself.

"Monsieur would make a fortune in the *café-chantant*,"

commented Gaston. He began to feel, at last, after the favorable reception of his speech, a little cheered. He felt cooler, too, in this quiet rushing moonlight of the river. "What is it that Monsieur sings? It seems to me that I have heard that air."

"Very likely you have, Gaston. It is a little song of sentiment, sung by all the sentimental young ladies of the world. He who wrote it, however, was far from sentimental. He was a fellow countryman of mine — and of the late Abraham! — who loved your country so much that he lived in it and died in it." And Magin sang again, more loudly, the first words of the song:

"Ich weiss nicht, was soll es bedeuten,
Dass ich so traurig bin;
Ein Märchen aus alten Zeiten,
Das kommt mir nicht aus dem Sinn."

Gaston listened with admiration, astonishment, and perplexity. It suddenly came back to him how this original Brazilian had sworn when the chest caught his clothes.

"But, Monsieur, I thought — Are you, then, a German?"

Magin, after a second, laughed.

"But Gaston, am I then an enemy?"

Gaston examined him in the moonlight.

"Well," he answered slowly, "if your country and mine are at war —"

"What has that to do with us, as you just now so truly said? You have found that your country's quarrel was not cause enough for you to leave Persia, and so have I. *Voilà tout!*" He examined Gaston in turn. "But I thought you knew all the time. Such is fame! I flattered myself that your Monsieur Guy would leave no one untold. Whereas he has left us the pleasure of a situation more piquant, after all, than I supposed. We enjoy the magnificent moonlight of the south, we admire a historic river under its most successful aspect, and we do not exalt ourselves because our countrymen, many

hundreds of miles away, have lost their heads." He smiled over the piquancy of the situation. "Strength is good," he went on in his impressive bass, "and courage is better. But reason, as you so justly say, is best of all. For which reason," he added, "allow me to recommend to you, my dear Gaston, that you look a little where you are steering."

Gaston looked. But he discovered that his moment of cheer had been all too brief. A piquant situation, indeed! The piquancy of that situation somehow complicated everything more darkly than before. If there were reasons why he should not go away with the others, as they had all taken it for granted that he would do, was that a reason why he, Gaston, whose father had lost a leg at Gravelotte, should do this masquerading German a service? All the German's amiability and originality did not change that. Perhaps, indeed, that explained the originality and amiability. The German, at any rate, did not seem to trouble himself about it. When Gaston next looked over his shoulder, Magin was lying flat on his back in the bottom of the boat, with his hands under his head and his eyes closed. And so he continued to lie, silent and apparently asleep, while his troubled companion, hand on wheel and *béret* on ear, steered through the waning moonlight of the Karun.

VII

The moon was but a ghost of itself, and a faint rose was beginning to tinge the pallor of the sky behind the Bakhtiari mountains, when the motor began to miss fire. Gaston, stifling an exclamation, cut it off, unscrewed the cap of the tank, and measured the gasoline. Then he stepped softly forward to the place in the bow where he kept his reserve cans. Magin, roused by the stopping of the boat, sat up, stretching.

"*Tiens!*" he exclaimed. "Here we are!" He looked about at the high clay banks enclosing the tawny basin

of the four rivers. In front of him the konar trees of Bund-i-Kir showed their dark green. At the right, on top of the bluff of the eastern shore, a solitary peasant stood white against the sky. Near him a couple of oxen on an inclined plane worked the rude mechanism that drew up water to the fields. The creak of the pulleys and the splash of the dripping goatskins only made more intense the early morning silence. "Do you remember, Gaston?" asked Magin. "It was here we first had the good fortune to meet — not quite three weeks ago."

"I remember," answered Gaston, keeping his eye on the mouth of the tank he was filling, "that I was the one who wished you peace, Monsieur; and that no one asked who you were or where you were going."

Magin yawned.

"Well, you seem to have satisfied yourself now on those important points. I might add, however, for your further information, that I think I shall not go to Bund-i-Kir, which looks too peaceful to disturb at this matinal hour, but there — on the western shore of the Ab-i-Shuteit. And that reminds me. I still have to pay you the rest of my ticket."

He reached forward and laid a little pile of gold on Gaston's seat. Gaston, watching out of the corner of his eye as he poured gasoline, saw that there were more than five napoleons in that pile. There were at least ten.

"What would you say, Monsieur," he asked slowly, emptying his tin, "if I were to take you instead to Sheleilieh — where there are still a few of the English?"

"I would say, my good Gaston, that you had more courage than I thought. By the way," he went on casually, "what is this?"

He reached forward again toward Gaston's seat, where lay the Bakhtiari's present. Gaston dropped his tin and made a snatch at it. But Magin was too quick for him. He retreated to his place at the stern of the boat, where he drew the knife out of its sheath.

"Sharp, too!" he commented, with a smile at Gaston. "And my revolver is gone!"

Gaston, very pale, stepped to his seat.

"That, Monsieur, was given me by my Bakhtiari brother-in-law — to take to the war. When he found I had not the courage to go, he ran away from me."

"But you thought there might be more than one way to make war, eh? Well, I at least am not an Apache. Perhaps the sharks will know what to do with it." The blade glittered in the brightening air and splashed out of sight. And Magin, folding his arms, smiled again at Gaston. "Another object of virtue for the safe custody of the Karun!"

"But not all!" cried Gaston thickly, seizing the little pile of gold beside him and flinging it after the knife.

Magin's smile broadened.

"Have you not forgotten something, Gaston?"

"But certainly not, Monsieur," he replied, putting his hand into his pocket. The next moment a second shower of gold caught the light. And where the little circles of ripples widened in the river, a sharp fin suddenly cut the muddy water.

"Oho! Mr. Shark loses no time!" cried Magin. He stopped smiling, and turned back to Gaston. "But we do. Allow me to say, my friend, that you show yourself really too romantic. This is no doubt an excellent comedy which we are playing for the benefit of that gentleman on the bluff. But even he begins to get tired of it. See? He starts to say his morning prayer. So be so good as to show a little of the reason which you know how to show, and start for shore. But first you might do well to screw on the cap of your tank — if you do not mind a little friendly advice."

Gaston looked around absent-mindedly, and took up the nickel cap. But he suddenly turned back to Magin.

"You speak too much about friends, Monsieur. I am not your friend. I am your enemy. And I shall not take

you there, to the Ab-i-Shuteit. I shall take you into the Ab-i-Gerger — to Sheleilieh and the English.”

Magin considered him, with a flicker in his lighted eyes.

“You might perhaps have done it if you had not forgotten about your gasoline — And you may yet. We shall see. But it seems to me, my — enemy! — that you make a miscalculation. Let us suppose that you take me to Sheleilieh. It is highly improbable, because you no longer have your knife to assist you. I, it is true, no longer have my revolver to assist me; but I have two arms, longer and I fancy stronger than yours. However, let us make the supposition. And let us make the equally improbable supposition that I fall into the hands of the English. What can they do to me? The worst they can do is to give me free lodging and nourishment till the end of the war! Whereas you, Gaston — you do not seem to have reflected that life will not be so simple for you, after this. There is a very unpleasant little word by which they name citizens who do not respond to their country’s call to arms. In other words, Mr. Deserter, you have taken the road which, in war time, ends between a firing-squad and a stone wall.”

Gaston, evidently, had not reflected on that. He stared at his nickel cap, turning it around in his fingers.

“You see?” continued Magin. “Well then, what about that little Gaston? I do not know what has suddenly made you so much less reasonable than you were last night; but I, at least, have not changed. And I see no reason why that little Gaston should be left between two horns of a dilemma. In fact I see excellent reasons not only why you should take me that short distance to the shore, but why you should accompany me to Dizful. There I am at home. I am, more than any one else, emperor. And I need a man like you. I am going to have a car, I am going to have a boat, I am going to have a place in the sun. There will be many changes in that country after the war. You will see. It is not so far,

either, from here. It is evident that your heart, like mine, is in this part of the world. So come with me. Eh, Gaston?"

"Heart!" repeated Gaston, with a bitter smile. "It is you who speak of the heart, and of — But you do not speak of the little surprise with which you might some day regale me, Mr. Enemy! Nor do you say what you fear — that I might take it into my head to go fishing at Umm-un-Nakhl!"

"Ah bah!" exclaimed Magin impatiently. "However, you are right. I am not like you. I do not betray my country for a little savage with a jewel in her nose! It is because of that small difference between us, Gaston, between your people and my people, that you will see such changes here after the war. But you will not see them unless you accept my offer. After all, what else can you do?" He left Gaston to take it in as he twirled his metal cap. "There is the sun already," Magin added presently. "We shall have a hot journey."

Gaston looked over his shoulder at the quivering rim of gold that surged up behind the Bakhtiari mountains. How sharp and purple they were, against what a deepening blue! On the bluff the white-clad peasant stood with his back to the light, his hands folded in front of him, his head bowed.

"You look tired, Gaston," said Magin pleasantly. "Will you have this cigar?"

"No, thank you," replied Gaston. He felt in his own pockets, however, first for a cigarette and then for a match. He was indeed tired, so tired that he no longer remembered which pocket to fumble in or what he held in his hand as he fumbled. Ah, that sacred tank! Then he suddenly smiled again, looking at Magin. "There is something else I can do!"

"What?" asked Magin as he lay at ease in the stern, enjoying the first perfume of his cigar. "You can't go back to France, now, and I should hardly advise you to go back to Sheleilieh. At least until after the war. Then

there will be no more English there to ask you troublesome questions!"

Gaston lighted his cigarette. And, keeping his eyes on Magin, he slowly moved his hand, in which were both the nickel cap and the still-burning match, toward the mouth of the tank.

"This!" he answered.

Magin watched him. He did not catch the connection at first. He saw it quickly enough, however. In his pale translucent eyes there was something very like a flare.

"Look out — or we shall go together after all!"

"We shall go together, after all," repeated Gaston. "And here is your place in the sun!"

Magin still watched, as the little flame flickered through the windless air. But he did not move.

"It will go out! And you have not the courage, Apache!"

"You will see, Prussian!" The match stopped, at last, above the open hole; but the hand that held it trembled a little, and so did the strange low voice that said: "This at least I can do — for that great lady, far away."

The peasant on the bluff, prostrated toward Mecca with his forehead in the dust, was startled out of his prayer by a roar in the basin below him. There where the trim-white jinn-boat of the *Firengi* had been was now a blazing mass of wreckage, out of which came fierce cracklings, hissings, sounds not to be named. As he stared at it the wreckage fell apart, began to disappear in a cloud of smoke and steam that lengthened toward the southern gateway of the basin. And in the turbid water, cut by swift sharks' fins, he saw a sudden bright trail of red, redder than any fire or sunrise. It paled gradually, the smoke melted after the steam, the current caught the last charred fragments of wreckage and drew them out of sight.

The peasant watched it all silently, as if waiting for some new magic of the *Firengi*, from his high bank of the

Karun — that snow-born river bound for distant palms, that had seen so many generations of the faces of men, so many of the barks to which men trust their hearts, their hopes, their treasures, as it wound, century after century, from the mountains to the sea. Then, at last, the peasant folded his hands anew and bowed his head toward Mecca.